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Supportive Communities for Children and Families

SYNOPSIS

Starting from the premise that strong families are a key factor in building healthy communities, the author recounts what children need to become productive members of society and what families need to help children succeed. The author describes what communities can do to help families and calls for the public will to support families as they struggle to raise healthy, successful children.

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We know what it takes for children to succeed—supportive families, economically and socially viable neighborhoods, and effective social services¹—yet we as a society have not taken the necessary actions to provide these things for all of our children. One reason may be a persistent belief in America in the ethic of individualism, self-reliance, and competition, which runs counter to the emphasis on cooperation and collaboration in community-building and family support efforts. Another is the deeply ingrained concept that children are solely the responsibility of the family and that government and community should intervene only when families fail. A related, subtle barrier is the notion that no one dare intrude with somebody else's child.

Cultural messages such as these do change over time, through the accumulated information and experiences of critical masses of people. Today, dramatic changes are occurring in communities across the country. Communities are examining their fundamental values and their collective

actions as they face their concerns about our nation's children. They are coming together around a shared mission: the healthy development of children. Knowledge of new ways of doing things is gradually permeating traditional educational, health, and social service systems. Since we know a good deal about what works for children and families, the question for us as a nation is: Will we muster the public will to do it?

Our children face many hardships. Too many start school unable to learn, cannot read by third grade, and drop out before high school graduation. Their families face hardships, too, including working parents too stressed to spend time with their children, single parents struggling to be both good providers and good parents, and racially and ethnically diverse families seeking equality in the larger society.

Grassroots efforts have mushroomed in communities across the nation in an attempt to alleviate these problems. Neighbors have joined neighbors, leaders have emerged, and work is being done to improve conditions for children and families. Local and state policy makers are recognizing the failure of bureaucratic, categorical, impersonal systems and are endorsing new ways of functioning that give voice and decision-making to community members while assuring comprehensive approaches to planning and services.

Until recently, community development has been focused on economic renewal, improved housing, and safer environments. Today, community development embraces the concepts of the Healthy Communities and Family Support movements, which emphasize that the ultimate goal is a community in which the economic, physical, and social environment enhances the well-being of the children and families living in it.

WHAT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES NEED

Child development research over many years has helped us understand what children require for healthy development. To become productive, contributing adults, children need to live in environments that provide some order and meet their basic physical and material needs. We know from research on children who manage to thrive in spite of apparently negative circumstances the critical importance of a consistent, caring adult for whom they are special, an adult able to stimulate and engage the child in an ongoing relationship. Other studies have underscored that children require adults in their immediate environment capable of instilling a positive sense of responsibility and passing on social and moral expectations. In addition



to friendships with community adults, they need freedom from discrimination, the opportunity for constructive achievement, and a sense of justice in their world.²

Public discussion seems to focus heavily on the form of family, rather than on its function, but how families work and what they do is what matters for children. Looking at the function families play leads to the question of whether the community helps or hinders fami-



lies—in whatever form they have taken—to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. To be the good parents that most want and hope to be, adults require work opportunities. To ensure health for family members, there must be adequate health care, adequate housing, safety, good schools, and quality child care. For optimal development, families need support from neighbors, schools, and public officials and opportunities to develop relationships

and pursue their special interests. If there are safe parks for children to play in, transportation readily accessible, supervised gathering places for young people, flexible work schedules, and comprehensive school programs, the burden on families for daily care is lessened and they are able to fulfill their responsibilities more effectively.

A lack of resources in any of the essential dimensions diminishes the family's ability to carry out its mission.

The effect of poverty supersedes all others. Without adequate income, the likelihood of getting necessary health care, good housing, adequate education, or any other opportunities diminishes substantially. The resulting tension increases the likelihood of instability in relationships among family members, further decreasing the family's ability to maintain an optimal environment for healthy development. Though there is a growing tendency to blame poverty on "family disintegration," even to suggest marriage as a solution to poverty, the reality is best stated by sociologist Donald J. Hernandez, formerly with the US Census Bureau: "Even if every child in America were reunited with both biological parents, two-thirds of those who are poor today would still be poor."³

THE ROLE OF FAMILIES

For centuries, the family, regardless of its structure or belief, has had a few essential functions:

- Provide basic needs (shelter, food, clothing), safety, care, and comfort for each family member.
- Promote appropriate character and educational development in a nurturing environment and in the context of the family's traditions and culture.
- Serve as a bridge to the larger society, communicating its values and helping each family member establish satisfying, mutually helpful relationships outside the family.

Families that produce healthy children have a number of characteristics in common. Warmth and affection among family members, high expectations for children, and regular activities that include everyone give children a good start. Social connections with other families and with a spiritual or cultural community also ground children with a sense of identity and belonging as well as concern for others. Well-functioning families provide high levels of structure.⁴ Stability within the family is also necessary if families are to accomplish their purpose. Whenever relationships between family members become consistently hostile, or family members shift in and out of the household, children feel abandoned by those they believe are responsible for them and bear the burden of making new adjustments. School problems and delinquent behavior can often be traced to the anxiety and stress created by family instability.⁵

Threats to a family's ability to provide material or emotional and social support to its members can come from a variety of directions. External events, such as job or housing loss, or internal crises, such as divorce, child

abuse, or estrangement among family members, present enormous challenges. Unexpected events in the life of a family, such as the birth of a handicapped child or a teenager becoming pregnant, are critical turning points in the family's life together. "Normal" events like new jobs, marriages, deaths, and household moves also precipitate changes in family relationships and status that may affect the family's ability to fulfill its mission. A family's ability to sustain itself through the multitude of events that occur is key to its long-term health.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES

The elements necessary for a strong community are not mysterious. Research over time has supported the old-fashioned ideas of what makes a community livable and capable of sustaining the families who live there.

Economic stability. Economic stability and adequate income provide a base for meeting the needs of community members. In the simplest terms, jobs that pay an adequate wage are critical for securing food, shelter, and clothing plus medical care, transportation, and other necessary services that all families need from time to time.

Beyond meeting basic needs, the economic health of the community affects the family's psychological well-being. Without a regular source of adequate income, adults are forced to spend all their resources of time and attention on securing basic needs—time and attention that is then unavailable for nurturing children or being concerned about the needs of others. Communities with high proportions of families at the mercy of plant closings, layoffs, or seasonal employment and too few jobs that provide wages adequate to meet family needs experience a constant shortage of the human energy and attention necessary to sustain strong families.⁶

Threats to an individual family's economic health create internal family stress, which often accompanies other problems. A death, job loss, or divorce is an economic emergency in addition to an emotional one.

Families need many kinds of support from their communities when they are in the middle of multifaceted crises. For example, in the early 1980s, when the farm economy reached its lowest level in many years, many farm families were faced with selling land that had been in their families for generations. Domestic violence, child maltreatment, and suicide reports dramatically increased in rural areas often thought to be immune from these problems. Local ministers, social service agencies, rural media outlets, businesses, and networks of friends mobilized to alert families to the dangers

inherent in their circumstances, and to provide immediate assistance.

The extent to which living in a poor community increases stress in a family is evident in data showing the high level of depression among poor mothers. Persistent poverty during the first five years of life leaves children with an IQ deficit of more than nine points³ Research reported by William J. Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged*⁷ and *When Work Disappears*⁸ draws clear connections between community conditions and high rates of youth violence, school failure, and teenage pregnancy.

Community services and human resources. When a community is focused on promoting the health of its families, a rich array of primary services (activities, facilities, and events) "offer opportunities for participation, avenues for contributing to the well-being of others, and sources of personal support. They enable children to form friendships and find support from both peers and adults, investigate interests, and form ties to cultural, religious, and civic traditions."⁹ Primary services include faith institutions and libraries, parks, and museums, which support community celebrations, arts and crafts fairs, orchestras and bands, sports teams, and cultural exchanges. In addition, neighborhood family resource centers offer parent education, peer groups, information and referral, parent-child activities, and family support.

A healthy community offers a network of contacts, widely available to families, that contribute to emotional security. These vital human resources prevent problems as well as promote health. The informal friendship and support networks in a community are powerful antidotes to isolation, safety nets in times of crisis, and promoters of a sense of safety and well-being. "In many instances, if these informal networks are strong, people have less need for formal services."¹⁰

It has also become apparent that natural neighborhood leaders are a vital source of support and assistance to families. The woman on the block who welcomes children into her home after school for milk and cookies, the handyman who helps others fix things, the elderly storyteller whom children love to listen to contribute to a feeling of security in coping with daily living. Also contributing to the strength of a community are parent groups,

many organized by the parents themselves. Some groups are organized to meet parents' need for information on child development, others as peer support groups, and a growing number as advocates for a perceived need, such as safer streets, more child care, or a community playground. Often parents participating in a family resource center become leaders of advocacy efforts around state and local policy issues, and the center itself serves as an empowering resource.

The activities of the Westtown Leadership Project in a Hispanic community in Chicago illustrate the extent to which parents can promote community development. Parent Action Teams have established English as a second language and GED classes, created safety patrols, expanded communications with principals, initiated the hiring of a bilingual teacher, and hosted cultural and recognition events for families and children.

Just as the community environment is a major factor in strengthening families, so strong families are a key component to building healthy communities.

ESTABLISHING FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

An ecological understanding of the relationship of children to their families, and families to their communities, is incomplete without recognition of the relationship of communities to state and national policies and practices. Key to maintaining health in a community are resources to prevent crises, starting from birth, followed by coordinated, comprehensive formal services to deal with the small and

large family crises that inevitably occur in the normal life of any family. Support for these resources has to come from outside the community itself, from the larger public system of institutions created to provide prevention strategies for all families, and treatment services when children or families need them.

Increasingly, legislators and policy makers have realized that tending to the problems of children and families and enriching the communities in which they live requires reshaping standard ways of operating. This means changing the everyday practices of the huge, entrenched public institutions that serve children so they are driven not by bureaucratic, legislative, professional, or funding requirements but by the needs of children and families themselves.

Intentionally integrating the goal of strengthening families into program planning for housing, teen preg-

nancy prevention, or nutrition programs can dramatically change both the results and the way programs are implemented. For example, a nutrition initiative in a large city arranged for homeless children to be fed breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day at school. Initially the children's parents were not provided with food or the opportunity to share even one meal a day with their children. When policies and procedures were changed and families were included, program staff members learned to think about their work in a different way.

Health promotion services for families. Based on our understanding of the interrelationship of children, families, communities, and the larger society, it is possible to project a framework for a comprehensive, prevention-oriented health promotion plan for children and families. The first step would be assuring adequate prenatal care. Following birth, a home visiting program would be in place to offer guidance, answer questions, make referrals to other resources, and connect parents to the community. Home visiting also makes it possible to detect problems in children's development early on and assure that help is given in a timely fashion. During the crucial, formative years from birth to three years, family resource centers for parents, infants, and toddlers would assist parents in understanding children's early development and responding to their children's behavior sensitively and appropriately. For working parents, quality day care in or outside of the home would be available, care in which the ratio of adults to children would reflect the importance of consistent, responsive adults in the very young child's life, and care in which families are actively involved.

Having set the foundation for a good start, the customary programs would come into play: preschools in and outside of the school system and help for both children and families to transition into public schools. In the middle years, good schools in which children are stimulated and encouraged are fundamental to the positive growth of children. Schools that include well-staffed and carefully planned before- and after-school activities, and in which parents play a governance role, signal the commitment of a community to its children. The trajectory continues through high school, with the provision of supportive activities and mentoring relationships for young people.

Family resource centers can be cornerstones for families at every stage of their children's development. These centers provide access to information on child development as well as discussion groups, peer support, parent-child activities, advocacy activities, English as a second language classes, counseling, and referral to other resources. Centers exist in schools, community centers,

and churches and are already playing a role in building their communities in many areas of the nation.¹¹

This array of programs, if available to all families from birth, would constitute a floor for healthy development and would be complemented by a continuum of service systems, both public and private, designed to care for families in stress or crisis and for children with special needs. First in this line of special services are early intervention programs, followed by child welfare, child protection, and mental health services and services for children with disabilities. Last is the adoption system for children whose families are unable to care for them.

Economic services. Since community health, even with an ideal complement of services and supports, cannot be achieved without economic stability, enhancing families' ability to become economically self-sufficient is critical. One way to do this is through programs that provide job training, assistance in locating jobs, and continuing support as people enter the workforce. Another is supporting small businesses as they get started and aggressive promotion of community jobs. A third is providing training in financial literacy, budget keeping, and planning.¹² An example of a community in which all sectors understand the importance of nurturing and supporting families is Hampton, Virginia.¹³ Concerned with an economic downturn, Hampton's leaders recognized the link between early, healthy development of children and future economic development. A group of community partners, including the city's elected leadership, major businesses, the Health, Education, and Social Services Departments, the Housing Authority, the library, and the local hospital, formed a steering committee that launched the Hampton Family Resource Project, whose mission is to ensure "that all Hampton children are born healthy and enter school healthy and ready to learn." The City Council provided new funding for family-oriented programs while other areas faced cutbacks. The project provides comprehensive services for all parents and children through age five. All families in the community receive information about child development, the hospital provides free prenatal classes, Healthy Start programs provide home visiting, libraries run young family centers to encourage family literacy, and the Housing Authority provides free space for community parenting groups.

THE TAPESTRY OF CHILDREN FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

The attributes of families and communities are interwoven strands affecting the daily life of children. A

child who lives in a stable family develops the confidence and competence that enable her or him to enter the community as an active learner and to comfortably form friendships with classmates and neighbors. However, if the preschool or school the child attends is staffed with unqualified teachers and is poor in resources, if there are no after-school programs, or if the child feels unsafe as she or he walks to and from school, the child's sense of well-being is seriously threatened. The family suffers as well, rendered helpless because their efforts to do the best they can for their children are undermined by the community in which they live.

Alternatively, a child from a dysfunctional family can be assisted if there is a strong community in which people and agencies become actively involved in helping both the child and the family.

A set of family support principles remarkably similar to those developed by progressive community-building projects is based on the following premises and assumptions:

- An ecological understanding of human beings in their social world which assumes that children and families are embedded within broader aspects of the environment, including communities with cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics that are affected by the values and policies of the larger society.
- An empowerment model based on the belief that the people for whom programs, systems, and policies are designed must be participants in the planning and governance of the institutions that affect their lives.
- A belief that the well-being of children is dependent on the well-being of their families and of the communities in which they reside.
- A respect for the strengths in diverse cultures, races, and ethnic groups.
- A commitment to the promotion of healthy families from the start, replacing a crisis orientation.
- A belief that all families deserve and require support in various degrees at various times and, that, therefore, community services and systems must be designed to support all families.

Just as the community environment is a major factor in strengthening families, strong families are a key component to building healthy communities.

We know what families need to raise productive, educated, healthy children. We also know that families need the economic and social support of their communities both in times of crisis and when facing normal daily challenges so that they can maintain the strength and independence they need to make their children's lives whole. When we resolve to commit ourselves to serving the needs of children and their families, the result is fully functioning, healthier communities.

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